

# The birds of Namuli, northern Mozambique: retracing Vincent's footsteps

Peter Ryan<sup>a</sup>, Claire Spottiswoode<sup>a</sup>, Vincent Parker<sup>b</sup>, John Graham<sup>a</sup>, Callan Cohen<sup>a</sup> and Carlos Bento<sup>c</sup>

Depuis l'expédition de Jack Vincent en 1932, aucun ornithologue n'avait visité le Mont Namuli, le pic le plus haut dans le nord du Mozambique. Vincent y avait décrit deux nouvelles espèces d'oiseaux, l'Apalis du Mont Namuli *Apalis (thoracica) lynesi* et la Grive tachetée *Arcanator orostruthus*. En novembre 1998, nous avons passé une semaine dans le massif et avons pu constater que d'importantes populations de l'apalis et de la grive, ainsi que d'une autre espèce menacée, l'Alêthe du Mont Cholo *Alethe choloensis*, y subsistent. Au total, 130 espèces d'oiseaux y ont été observées, parmi lesquelles les premières Hirondelles rousselines *Hirundo daurica* enregistrées au Mozambique. Selon nos estimations, 1,300 ha de forêt subsistent à Namuli; bien que cette forêt soit encore en bon état, elle est menacée par les feux de brousse et l'exploitation du bois de chauffe.

**M**ozambique has been off-limits to birders for much of the last two decades due to the civil war that wracked the country following independence. Even prior to this unrest, the poor infrastructure and reputation for diseases deterred all but the most intrepid explorers from venturing much into its interior. As a result, parts of Mozambique are among the ornithologically least known areas in Africa. This is especially true of the area between the Zambezi River and Tanzania, where most of our knowledge of the region's birds dates back to Jack Vincent's epic collecting trip of 1931–32<sup>5</sup>.

Vincent sought to establish the boundary between the avifaunas of southern and eastern Africa, and was especially keen to work in montane forests. The highlight of his trip was a visit to Mount Namuli, the highest mountain in northern Mozambique, where he collected two new bird species: Namuli Apalis *Apalis lynesi* (considered by *Birds of Africa* as a subspecies of Bar-throated Apalis *A. thoracica*) and Dapplethroat *Arcanator orostruthus*. Dapplethroat has since been discovered

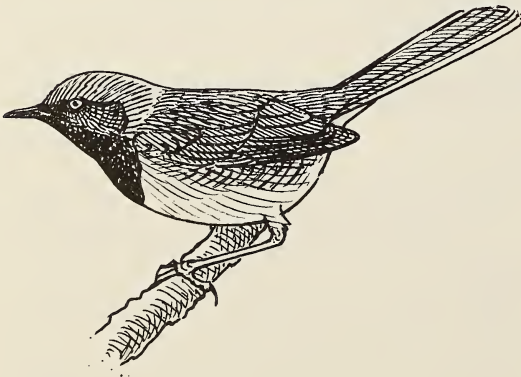
in the East Usumbara and Udzungwa Mountains of Tanzania, but the apalis is unknown elsewhere and is Mozambique's only endemic bird. Both are classified as Vulnerable<sup>1</sup>.

Other species of global conservation concern found by Vincent at Namuli include Thyolo Alethe *Alethe choloensis*, restricted to 15 forests in southern Malawi and northern Mozambique, and the *belcheri* race of Green Barbet *Stactolaema olivacea*, found only at Thyolo and Namuli. As a result, the forest at Namuli was ranked #37th of 76 important forests in a review of the key forests for threatened birds in the Afrotropical and Malagasy regions<sup>2</sup>. Namuli scored higher than Uganda's Impenetrable Forest and Kenya's Kakamega Forest, both of which have been the subject of considerable study and conservation attention. It is thus amazing that no birders have visited Namuli since Vincent's expedition, to check on the status of the forests and their birds.

Moves to rectify this were initiated by Keith Barnes in 1997 but had to be shelved due to a lack of suitable vehicles. It was only in November 1998 that the expedition could finally take place, with Keith sadly left behind because of conflicting commitments. The joy of 'rediscovering' Namuli was left to the six authors of this article.

## Getting to Namuli

Much of the interior of northern Mozambique consists of a relatively level plateau at 700–800 m. The extensive massif of Namuli rises to 1,600 m above the plateau; the area above 1,200 m measures 50 x 30 km. It lies c160 km east of Mulanje, a large montane block in south-east Malawi, and the easiest access is from that country. By road, it is just 180 km from the Mozambique border at Milanje to Gurué, at the southern edge of the Namuli massif. The road is gravel, but has been rebuilt recently and one could easily travel it in a few hours. Birders will have



Namuli Apalis *Apalis lynesi* by Mark Andrews

trouble concentrating on the road, however, as it passes through large tracts of near-pristine miombo woodland with occasional dambos. We were single-minded about reaching Namuli, but the one dambo we checked held 10 Blue Quail *Coturnix adansonii* as well as Harlequin Quail *C. delegorguei*, Kurrichane Button-Quail *Turnix sylvatica*, Dwarf Bittern *Ixobrychus sturmii*, Black Coucal *Centropus grillii* and African Grass Owl *Tyto capensis*. Imagine what they must hold once the rainy season starts!

Gurué is a regional centre, once famous for having the most extensive tea estates in the Southern Hemisphere. The town is slowly being rebuilt following the civil war, and the tea estates are being brought back into production. We visited the local administrator to present our credentials (CB had an impressive sheaf of official letters from Maputo to ease our way through the local bureaucracy), but we did not linger. Although the Serra Maifi, at the south edge of the Namuli massif, looms more than 1,000 m above the town, little natural vegetation remains on its slopes. Only a small, remnant forest patch clings to the near-vertical slopes above the town waterworks. This does support Namuli Apalis and many of the other forest birds, but it is not easy to work and entails a stiff climb to even reach it. Birders wanting to visit the area are better advised to concentrate on the much larger forests near the main peak.

Mt. Namuli, the highest point of the massif, at 2,412 m, is a spectacular granite dome c12 km north-east of Gurué. Vincent worked its southern slopes in 1932, and we targeted this area for study. Topographical maps marked a track leading east from Gurué and thence between the

Serra Maifi and Serra Merrece. Our enquiries at the Monte Branco tea estate produced conflicting reports as to the state of this road, but it proved not to be as bad as feared, and was being upgraded during our visit. Beyond the pass, the road contours along the gentle slopes of the Malema river valley. Bearing left at the first fork brings one to a rickety bridge over the river (look for Half-collared Kingfisher *Alcedo semitorquata* here and a spectacular roost of fruit bats on the nearby cliffs). From here it's only a few kilometres to another bridge (even more precarious than the first) at the foot of the main peak. This is a fine camping spot, within an hour's walk of Ukalini Forest.

We couldn't help but compare our trip with that undertaken by Vincent. We had made the trip from the Malawi border to the base of Mt. Namuli in a single day. Vincent took weeks to manoeuvre his vehicles to within 50 miles of the mountain, and then set off with a team of 42 porters to walk the rest of the way. En route his camp was raided by man-eating Lions *Panthera leo*, which had killed 20 people in the preceding three weeks. When he finally reached the mountain, the porters went on strike, and Vincent faced the uncertain prospect of being marooned at Namuli<sup>1</sup>. His exploits made our trip appear simple, but we still experienced considerable satisfaction at having finally reached the goal of Vincent's travels.

### Birding Namuli: base camp

Most of our observations were concentrated around the lower camp (1,250 m) and in Ukalini Forest, at the base of the main peak (1,550–1,850 m). The best birding is to be had higher up, but the lower area has its attractions, supporting a greater diversity of birds.

When Vincent visited Namuli, the valley above the campsite was forested (the Ukusini Forest)<sup>1</sup>. This has largely been cleared for agriculture, but remnants persist along a stream, and there are patches of secondary scrub. Namuli Apalis is abundant in this remaining forest and thicket, with pairs approximately every 50 m by the river. Thyolo Alethe is also common, with pairs every 150 m in the same area. Other species that are common here but scarce or absent at higher elevations include African Broadbill *Smithornis capensis*, Little Greenbul *Andropadus virens*, Eastern Nicator *Nicatorgularis*, Red-capped Robin-Chat *Cossypha natalensis*, Ashy Flycatcher *Muscicapa caerulescens* and Black-throated Wattle-eye *Platysteira peltata*.

The lower valley also supports some well-developed miombo woodland, especially on the northern slope of the valley. Birds in the miombo include Rufous-bellied Tit *Parus rufiventris*, Red-faced Crombec *Sylvietta whytii*, Mozambique Batis *Batis soror*, Miombo Double-collared Sunbird *Nectarinia*

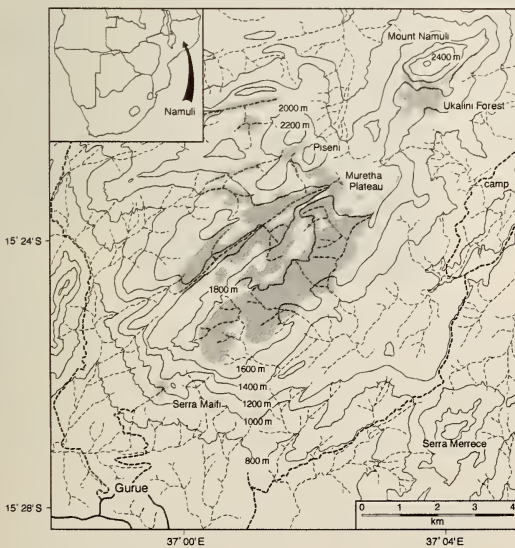


Figure 1. Map of the Namuli Massif, showing the main localities mentioned in the text. Shading indicates the extent of intact forest; bold lines indicate roads and tracks.





Black-throated Wattle-eye *Platysteira peltata* by Mark Andrews

*manoensis*, Western Violet-backed Sunbird *Anthreptes longuemarei* and Cabanis's Bunting *Emberiza cabanisi*. The dense miombo woodland also attracts some forest species, including the occasional Thyolo Alethe. Rank grassland around the lower camp is also worth searching for Moustached Grass-Warbler *Melocichla mentalis*, Singing *Cisticola cantans* and Croaking Cisticolas *C. natalensis*, Red-winged Warbler *Heliolais erythroptera*, Blue-billed Firefinch *Lagonostica rubricata* and African Citril *Serinus citrinelloides*.

### Ukalini Forest

At present there are no habitations above 1,350 m, and the forests above 1,500 m are largely intact. The Ukalini Forest, nestling below the impressive granite dome of Mt. Namuli, appears little changed from Vincent's descriptions and photographs. It is still the same size (c80 ha) as it was when aerial photographs were taken of the area in 1966. This is where Vincent collected his sole specimen of Dapplethroat, and it was with some excitement that we ventured forth in search of this notoriously elusive bird.

We established camp near the lower edge of Ukalini Forest, and at dusk a rich, melodious whistle set our pulses racing. Dawn the following morning confirmed that the songster was indeed Dapplethroat, and that it was rather common here. We estimated that, in at least some areas, the density was 2–3 singing birds per ha, more than double that recorded at any other site<sup>1</sup>. The two mist-netted individuals confirmed that the nominate race, known only from Namuli, differs from the two Tanzanian races in being significantly more rufous on the wings and tail, and in having only very diffuse dappling on the throat and breast.

The other three globally threatened birds reported by Vincent were also still present in Ukalini Forest. Namuli



1



2



3

Apalis was the most abundant bird other than Eastern Olive Sunbird *Nectarinia olivacea*, with a density of c13 birds per ha. Thyolo Alethe was the fifth most abundant species, following Stripe-cheeked Greenbul *Andropadus milanjensis* and White-tailed Crested Flycatcher *Elminia albonotata*. We estimated the total population of Thyolo Alethe to exceed the 1,000 pairs estimated to occur at Mulanje<sup>3</sup>, making Namuli the single most important site for this species. The birds here are recognised as being subspecifically distinct, having paler underparts than birds farther



4



5



6



7

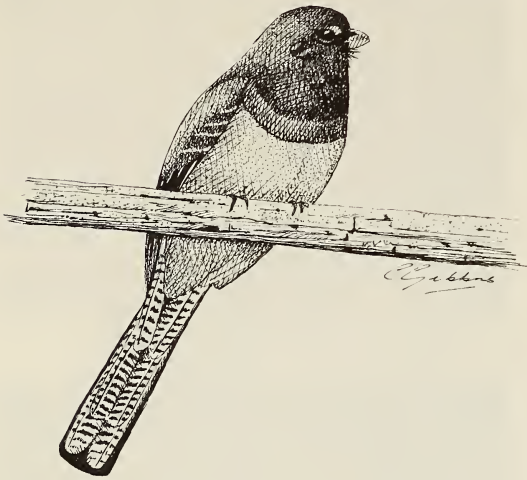


8

1. Looming above the seemingly endless lowland plains, our first view of the Namuli massif signified the end of our three-year preparation (Claire Spottiswoode)
2. The sheer 500 m granite face of Mt. Namuli (2,412 m), the highest peak of the massif, dwarfs the 80 ha Ukalini forest. In the foreground are subsistence farmlands within *Brachystegia* woodland (Claire Spottiswoode)
3. Ukalini forest below the main peak supports strict forest specialists such as the highly localised Dapplethroat *Arcanator orostrubus* (Callan Cohen)
4. In 1932, Jack Vincent reported the curiously widespread custom of keeping a caged Yellow-eyed Canary *Serinus mozambicus* (Claire Spottiswoode)

5. The first-ever photograph of Namuli Apalis *Apalis (thoracica) lymesi*. This male was the first we found—and had a nest close to our base camp. (Claire Spottiswoode & Callan Cohen)
6. Namuli Apalis *Apalis (thoracica) lymesi* is often considered to be a subspecies of Bar-throated Apalis *A. thoracica*, but as this photograph, of a female mist-netted in Ukalini forest, demonstrates there are striking differences between the two taxa (Callan Cohen)
7. The enigmatic Dapplethroat *Arcanator orostrubus*, mist-netted in dense understorey in the high-altitude Ukalini forest. This was only the second record ever of the nominate subspecies, although it occurs at fairly high densities in undisturbed habitat (John Graham)
8. Thyolo Alethe *Alethe choloensis* was remarkably common in the forests; our fieldwork suggests that Namuli could be the most important site for this globally threatened species (Claire Spottiswoode)





Bar-tailed Trogon *Apaloderma vittatum* by Chris Gibbins

west. The *belcheri* race of Green Barbet was less abundant (perhaps only one pair every 10 ha), but still reasonably common throughout the forest and therefore also more abundant here than at Thyolo, where the population is estimated at less than 80 pairs<sup>3</sup>.

The other five species completing the ten most abundant birds were White-starred Robin *Pogonocichla stellata*, Malawi Batis *Batis (capensis) dimorpha*, Livingstone's Turaco *Tauraco livingstonii*, Yellow-streaked Bulbul *Phyllastrephus flavostriatus* and Eastern Double-collared Sunbird *Nectarinia mediocris*. Other interesting species found in Ukalini Forest included Bar-tailed Trogon *Apaloderma vittatum*, Scaly-throated Honeyguide *Indicator variegatus*, Placid (Cabanis's) Greenbul *Phyllastrephus (cabanisi) placidus*, Orange Ground-Thrush *Zoothera gurneyi*, Evergreen Forest-Warbler *Bradypterus lopezi*, Black-headed Apalis *Apalis melanocephala*, Black-fronted Bush-Shrike *Telophorus nigrifrons* and Red-faced Crimson-wing *Cryptospiza reichenovii*. Two other species found in the highland forests are represented here by endemic subspecies: Yellow-throated Woodland-Warbler *Phylloscopus ruficapilla quelimanensis* and Olive-flanked Robin-Chat *Cossypha anomala gurue*, although the latter is often subsumed within the nominate race *C. a. anomala*.

### Grassland birds

Surrounding the highland forests are montane grasslands, which range from short swards on the steep granite slopes with shallow soils to taller, swampy meadows in the hollows

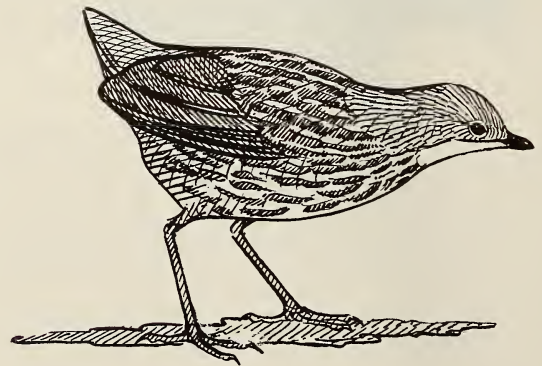
of the Muretha Plateau. These grasslands support fewer birds, but there are interesting populations of Wailing Cisticola *Cisticola lais* and a rather dark form of African Pipit *Anthus cinnamomeus* (itself considered, by *Birds of Africa*, as a race of Richard's Pipit *A. novaeseelandiae*). Other grassland species include Shelley's Francolin *Francolinus shelleyi* and Striped Pipit *Anthus lineiventri*, with Hildebrandt's Spurfowl *Francolinus hildebrandti* and African Yellow Warbler *Chloropeta natalensis* in bracken and rank grass at the forest edge.

Other noteworthy birds encountered outside the forests included Striped Flufftail *Sarothrura affinis* on the Muretha Plateau, a pair of Peregrine *Falco peregrinus* over the main peak, Cape Eagle Owl *Bubo capensis* calling in farm-bush at 1,300 m, and a large flock of Scarce Swift *Schoutedenapus myoptilus* over the foothills. We also made the first Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica* record in Mozambique, with one pair apparently nesting in an outcrop in the grasslands below Mt. Namuli.

### Conservation

We estimated that c1,300 ha of forest remains on the main massif between Gurué and Mt. Namuli (Fig. 1). Assuming the avifauna of the southern forests to be similar to that at Ukalini Forest, Namuli is the single most important site for at least three globally threatened species, making it probably the most critical Important Bird Area in Mozambique. It urgently requires formal conservation protection.

At present, c7,000 people live in the Malema river valley, east of the main forest. Apart from grazing their goats and feral pigs on the grasslands surrounding the forests, humans have had little impact on areas above



Striped Flufftail *Sarothrura affinis* by Mark Andrews

1,500 m. Limited logging for local use occurs in Ukalini Forest, but this does not appear to present a serious problem at current rates of exploitation. Fires are set to improve grassland grazing, but burn into the forest edge and may pose a more serious threat.

To date, their relative remoteness and the lack of access for commercial logging has protected the forests. The steep scarps along the southern and western edges of the massif limit access to the eastern side, and even here the rudimentary track to Gurué does not readily permit access. The most serious threat facing the forests is that the road to Gurué could be upgraded to the point where logging trucks could use it.

Assuming the area can be saved from commercial logging, the challenge will be to prevent the gradual degradation of the remaining forests by the slow expansion of subsistence croplands and associated activities. One way to do this is to promote ecotourism to the area, and ensure that substantial benefits from this tourism accrue to the local people. Namuli has many attractions that could make it a successful ecotourism destination: spectacular scenery, a healthy climate and clean water, and interesting wildlife including an endemic bird and squirrel. In the short term most visitors are likely to be birders seeking Namuli Apalis. Birders visiting the area are encouraged to cooperate with the local people, provide positive feedback on the conservation importance of the Namuli forests, and offer some material assistance to the local community (e.g. through camping fees, hiring guides, donating food and medicines, etc.).

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the financial support received from a BP Conservation Award and an African Bird Club grant. ☺

## References

1. Collar, N.J., Crosby, M.J. and Stattersfield, A.J. 1994. *Birds to watch 2: the world list of threatened birds*. Cambridge, UK: BirdLife International.
2. Collar, N.J. and Stuart, S.N. 1988. *Key forests for threatened birds in Africa*. Cambridge, UK: International Council for Bird Preservation.
3. Dowsett-Lemaire, F. 1989. Ecological and biogeographical aspects of forest bird communities in Malawi. *Scopus* 13: 1–80.
4. Vincent, J. 1933. The Namuli Mountains, Portuguese East Africa. *Geogr. J.* 81: 314–327.
5. Vincent, J. 1933–35. The birds of northern Portuguese East Africa. Comprising a list of, and observations on, the collections made during the British Museum Expedition of 1931–32. *Ibis* 13 (3): 611–652; 13 (4): 126–160, 300–340, 495–527, 757–799; 13 (5): 1–37, 355–397, 485–529, 707–762; 13 (6): 48–125.

<sup>a</sup> Percy FitzPatrick Institute, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa.

<sup>b</sup> Mozambique Bird Atlas, Endangered Wildlife Trust, P. Bag X11, Parkview 2122, South Africa.

<sup>c</sup> Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, Museu de Historia Natural, PO Box 257 Maputo, Mozambique.



Supported by ABC Conservation Fund